

Sustainable Northampton
Focus Groups
Summary of Common Themes from Public Comments
June 2006

(Listing of themes has no particular ranking or priority)

Themes on Question 1: Given that change is an on-going aspect of a vibrant community, what characteristics and community values should guide Northampton as it plans for the future?

1. Northampton's natural beauty, facilities for outdoor recreation and farmland.
2. A vibrant and distinctive Downtown.
3. A mix of urban areas, rural areas and identifiable neighborhoods with distinctive personalities.
4. Quality arts, cultural, historic, and educational resources are a vital part of our community.
5. A versatile and diverse business and employment base that can adapt to change characterized by local ownership, creative occupations, and a concentration of education and social services.
6. A variety of transportation options providing easy access within the community.
7. A tolerant, inclusive, and civic-minded population that embraces diversity.

Themes on Question 2: General: During the time that you have lived and/or worked in Northampton, what changes in Northampton's social, economic and/or physical environment have most affected you? (positive or negative changes)

Business: During the time you have lived or operated a business in Northampton, what changes have most affected the business climate?

1. Traffic congestion and parking demand have increased while civility and safety have decreased.
2. Decreased affordability for residents, businesses, and artists
3. Northampton has become a regional hub with a vibrant downtown and increased tourism.
4. Decreasing revenues and resources for public education.
5. Increasing development pressure especially in outlying areas.
6. Increased environmental quality, conservation land, and protected areas but more is desired.
7. Decreasing state/federal aid, increasing local taxes and decreasing City services.

Themes on Question 3: General: What or where are there potential areas of conflict among the various goals or visions for a Sustainable Northampton? Business: Are there goals or articulated visions for a Sustainable Northampton that, in your opinion, might conflict with the goals of a viable business community?

Philosophical/Big Picture Conflicts

1. The conflict between residents' desire for services, and their willingness/ability to pay for them.
2. The conflict between planning ideas and matters of sustainable community, on the one hand, and the realities of private ownership of property on the other.
3. The conflict between lifestyles/current habits and the emerging realities of cost and uncertainty of energy supply.

4. The conflict between a City-focused sustainability plan, and the reality that it is the region as a whole that must operate on a sustainable basis.

Land Use Conflicts

1. The need for infill and greater density of downtown development, including reuse of existing structures, in contrast to the desire of many people to live in single family homes with yards and nearby green space and to not have more development in their neighborhood.
2. The desire for more businesses, jobs and diverse housing options at a range of affordability levels but new development can conflict with desire to keep open space, wildlife habitat and corridors, and agriculture.

Equity Conflicts

1. A desire for a diverse community yet Northampton's success as a desirable place to live is contributing to decreased affordability and diversity - There is a desire to be welcoming to outsiders, and their wealth, without pushing out working families and Northampton natives.
2. The arts are critical to the vitality of Northampton, but artists are being priced out of living, work and exhibition/performance space.
3. We like to think of Northampton as being progressive and welcoming, yet there are class conflicts, racial tensions, and concerns about educational equity in our community.
4. Increased property values are appreciated but not the increased property tax and decreased affordability that comes with increased value.

Transportation Conflicts

1. A desire to promote bikes, walking, reduced automobile use, and providing public transportation vs. the reality of automobile habits that will not change easily.
2. A desire for more parking downtown and public transportation serving commercial and employment centers with increasingly limited financial resources.

Economic Development Conflicts

1. Commercial rents continue to rise, which attracts investment, but many spaces are no longer affordable to local businesses.
2. The need to attract and retain a diversity of employers, especially industrial employers, vs. the price of industrial space, and regulatory issues, which make it difficult to do so.
3. The need for the City's major employers to expand, but without negative impacts on neighborhoods and the environment.
4. Appreciation for a vibrant downtown but concern about increasing urban problems, i.e. traffic, parking, homelessness, panhandling, and drug use.
5. Desire for more commercial development on King Street but differing opinions on how development should take place, i.e. pedestrian or auto oriented design/uses, mixed residential/commercial or strictly commercial.
6. Desire for a broad range of products, services, pricing and a desire to have primarily local businesses.
7. Perceived as a vibrant economy yet insufficient good paying jobs are causing people to live or work elsewhere.

Energy Conflicts

1. There is widespread support for energy conservation, but little in the way of tangible plans to make it happen.

Municipal Finance Conflicts

1. Desire for a quality educational system but insufficient resources and inability to pay for it.
2. There is a desire for improved public services, but with limited resources, it's hard to rally support for investing in, and maintaining, infrastructure and physical improvements.

Themes on Alternative Question 3: Seniors and Youth: What are the key areas of concern for Northampton's future that are most important to the senior citizens, youth of Northampton? Latino Community and Public Housing Tenants: What are the most important issues for you about living in Northampton (housing, jobs, education, services)? Arts: What are the biggest challenges to sustaining a successful and diverse, creative/artistic community in Northampton?

1. Keeping artists and affordable arts venues and workspaces in the City.
2. Need for increased community, municipal, and financial support for the arts.
3. Preserving arts as essential part of public education.
4. Additional parking downtown.
5. Affordable housing – seniors, artists, families.
6. Increased public transportation.
7. More businesses and jobs that can support living in Northampton.
8. Accessibility for disabled (public transit, buildings, streets).
9. More recreational/play areas and affordable activities for youth (safe alternatives to drinking, drug use, and sex).
10. Environment of tolerance, diversity, and fairness in public schools so all kids and families feel valued.
11. Education/schools need more financial support.
12. Preserve green areas/open spaces.

Themes on Question 4: What key actions, policies or infrastructure improvements should Northampton undertake to support a sustainable vision? (That would make a difference in maintaining a viable business community, that would support the arts and creative economy, that would benefit Latino Community and public housing tenants, that would be most helpful to seniors, most helpful to youth.)

Transportation & Parking

1. Address traffic congestion and safety. Suggestions - traffic calming measures/speed limits, car pooling/park and ride lots, hitchhiking, share car program (Zip Car), add more sidewalks, more accessible sidewalks, improve crosswalks, consider pedestrian mall zones, more bike lanes/racks, reduce automobile use.
2. Increase public transportation options - More routes, shuttle bus around town
3. Create more parking downtown

Equity

1. Create more affordable housing options – Subsidized and market rate (middle-income)
2. Create more recreation areas –create more active recreation areas and affordable recreation programs.
3. Support public education – increased funding sources, re-establish bilingual/ESL programs, more attention to resources for younger grades, reduce class size, ensure Latino and non-

English speaking children are succeeding, improve sex/drug/alcohol awareness education in schools.

4. Retain diversity of population and invest in all segments of community - reach out to marginalized populations, ensure Latinos are welcomed in City, accessibility for all both civic and physical, increase community policing (housing projects and downtown), improve property maintenance at Florence/Hampshire Heights.
5. Provide safe and affordable youth activities (youth center, skate park, youth night life).

Land Use

1. Concentrate Development in urban areas – Consider more mixed-use commercial/residential, infill development, incentives/disincentives.

Energy & Environment

1. Integrate energy conservation and awareness – City set an example/leadership, develop climate protection plan, renewable energy sources for city, solar panels and energy conservation for city buildings use of methane from landfill, restart Northampton Energy Resource Commission, energy building standards.
2. Protect open/green space and wildlife corridors - Create more conservation land, balance conservation and development, urban green/pocket parks, tree planting.

Cultural and Economy

1. Support arts and artists – arts education in schools, preserve affordable arts/performance venues, create affordable live/work and studio space, arts bulletin board/calendar, communication/collaboration with businesses, City subsidy or tax incentives for arts space and live/work space, update inventory of arts agencies/artists/venues.
2. Develop more businesses and job opportunities for all populations – particularly local and green business, industry, science/technology; better paying and diverse jobs, job training, jobs for youth, start-up business assistance for low-income residents (i.e. Latin foods store), support redevelopment of State Hospital (including emphasis on green biz) and Fairgrounds, market Northampton and make appealing for businesses to locate here, improve telecommunications, develop King Street (mixed ideas on how best to do this-big boxes vs. no big boxes, pedestrian vs. auto oriented, local vs. chains), address downtown trends (panhandling, parking, vacancies, drugs), address real estate prices.

Regional

Work at regional level and be a regional leader - in collaborations, economic development, sustainability, alternative transportation, education, smart growth, influence government funding.